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Scrutiny

To the editor:

Most of us at some point in our lives have owned a "clunker" car that we hope will start each morning and get us to work and back home. The most difficult decision in owning such a car is deciding when to let go. This usually occurs around the deadline for inspection when we are informed that we will have to pour more money into the "clunker" than it is worth to keep it on the road. We are faced with the reality that we will have to eventually spend even more money for a new car.

The Rhode Island General Assembly is facing a similar situation regarding the funding of our public schools. A special legislative commission, after two years of study, has concluded that we need a new school funding formula and must spend hundreds of millions of new tax dollars to keep our system of public education running.

The commission says that by doing so, Rhode Island will have a system of funding which is "adequate, equitable and predictable." The commission would like the General Assembly to take action in the next few weeks to begin implementation of this new school funding formula.

But I am not prepared to do so without a commitment to address the fundamental weaknesses of the existing system of public education, and I urge my colleagues in the General Assembly to seek this same commitment.

While I think the work done by the commission is to be commended, the following major questions have not been addressed:

- Does it make sense to invest millions of additional dollars in a system which has remained structurally unchanged?
- Do we need, and can we afford, more than 35 school districts to educate about 120,000 students?
- Where will the new money come from given the glum projections for growth in state revenue?
- How can the formula be "predictable" when the greatest expense, teacher compensation, will continue to be made by local school committee members who have shown little ability to control contract growth and expansion of benefits?
- How much of the new money would simply be needed to fulfill existing contract/retirement commitments?
- What would encourage the General Assembly to invest new dollars in education when every effort at reform has been a protracted battle with either the teacher unions, school committees or both?

To apply a new formula and hundreds of millions of new dollars to the existing system of public education is akin to painting a "clunker" before replacing the worn-out brakes. At first glance the "clunker" may look nicer, but would you really rely on it to meet your daily transportation needs?

Before we adopt the recommendations of the commission, the General Assembly should lift up the hood and take a serious look at the structure and contractual condition of education in Rhode Island.

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